BEGINNER

HOW NOT TO SUCK!

Problem Big, bulky, clunky, clumsy, barre chords

Solution Stick to 3s and 7s

BY JUDE GOLD

So, you can play barre chords. Great. Guess what: In many band situations, you'll rarely need them. Think about it: Rockers and metal-heads often strip these fat grips down to just roots and 5s (making them power chords), acoustic guitarists prefer the glorious ring of open strings (why do you think the capo was invented?), and, in funk and jazz groups, well, five- and six-note barre chords often sound just plain *muddy*.

Imagine, for a moment, that Herbie Hancock hires you to play guitar on his ultra-funky two-chord epic "Chameleon"— a near-endless jam that never really strays from its simple I-IV progression. Do you think the legendary keyboardist wants to hear you banging away all night on the bloated *B♭m7* and *E♭7* grips in Ex. 1? With the bass holding the roots and the keys providing plenty of rich harmony, the entire band (not to mention your poor fretting hand) may thank you if you reduce the chords as shown in Ex. 2. With the root and 5 stripped away, each diad in Ex. 2 contains only the funkiest two chord tones: the 3 and the 7.

For *B♭m7*, we play only the third-string 3, *D♭*, and the second-string 7, *A♭*. To get *E♭7*, simply lower *A♭* a half-step to *G*. Now, *G* is the 3 while *D♭* becomes the 7. These handy little two-note grips not only sit nicely in a mix of instruments, they're easy to squeeze, which means your fretting tendons won't burst into flames over the course of a long tune. Once you've learned the two shapes, cast aside the generic rhythm that's provided in favor of whatever strumming pattern you prefer.

Because this approach frees up some of your fretting hand fingers, it's great for harmonizing melodies, as demonstrated by Ex. 3—a more advanced riff inspired by the soulful bridge section of the Bobby Timmons standard "Moanin'." Notice that instead of fretting the gargantuan fingerings shown in the five grids above the music, we play two choice tones from each of those chords while playing a melody on the high string. Hip!